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ABSTRACT

By "self-esteem" is meant more than an innate sense of self-worth that presumably is a human birthright. Self-esteem is individuals' experience that they are appropriate to life and to the requirements of life. More specifically, self-esteem is confidence in the ability to think; confidence in the ability to cope with the challenges of life; and confidence in the right to be happy, the feeling of being worthy, deserving, entitled to assert one's needs and wants and to enjoy the fruits of one's efforts. Self-esteem is not a free gift, but a possession over time which represents an achievement. To say that self-esteem is a basic human need is to say that it makes an essential contribution to the life process; that it is indispensable to normal and healthy development; and that it has survival-value. If individuals do not believe in themselves the universe is a frightening place. The change from a manufacturing society to an information society and other social changes create demands for higher levels of education and training than were required of previous generations. These developments also create new demands on psychological resources. Persons possessing a decent level of self-esteem are now needed economically in large numbers. The virtues that self-esteem asks of individuals are also ones that life asks of individuals. (ABL)

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First International Conference on Self-Esteem

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Nathaniel Branden

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

"What is Self-Esteem?"

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It is a great honor to address you at the opening session of the First International Conference on Self-Esteem. All over the world today there is an awakening to the importance of self-esteem to individual and social well-being. We recognize that just as a human being cannot hope to realize his or her potential without healthy self-esteem, neither can a society whose members do not value themselves and do not trust their own minds. Self-esteem is an idea whose time has come.

We must take the responsibility, therefore, of clarifying for ourselves and others what precisely "self-esteem" means, how and why it affects our lives as profoundly as it does, and what conditions its attainment depends on. Only on this foundation can we build an understanding of how the principles of self-esteem psychology can be applied in psychotherapy, and to our schools, organizations, and social institutions of every kind.

That is why, at this opening session, I would like to share with you my thoughts on how self-esteem can best be defined and understood.

In my excitement about this conference, I found myself reflecting on the day, thirty-six years ago, when I wrote my first notes on self-esteem. It was 1954 and I was twenty-four years old, studying psychology at New York University, and already with a small private practice. The notes were not for publication but simply to help clarify my own thoughts. I wrote: "I'm beginning to think that the single most important key to human motivation is self-esteem. Yet no one seems to be writing or talking about it. What I want to understand is: (a) what *is* self-esteem? (b) what does it depend on? (c) why does it's presence or absence make such an enormous difference to people's lives and (d) *how can I prove it?*"

When I first went to the library in search of information about self-esteem, almost none was to be found. The indexes of books on psychology did not mention the term. Sigmund Freud had suggested that low "self-regard" was caused by a child's discovery that he or she could not have sexual intercourse with mother or father, which resulted in the helpless feeling "I can do nothing." I did not find this persuasive or illuminating as an explanation. Alfred Adler suggested that everyone started out with feelings of inferiority, caused, first, by bringing some physical liability or "organ inferiority" into the world, and second, by the fact that everyone else (that is, grown-ups or older siblings) was bigger and stronger; in other words, our curse is that we are not born perfectly formed mature adults. I did not find this helpful, either. A few psychoanalysts wrote about self-esteem, but in terms very different from my understanding of the concept, so that it was almost as if they were studying another subject. My first major effort to address the issues and questions self-esteem presented, "The Psychology of Self-Esteem," was written during the 1960s.

Culturally, it was only in the 1980s that self-esteem as a topic caught fire. Not only did books begin to appear in increasing numbers that made reference to the term, and elaborated on it to varying extents, but more scientific studies began appearing. However, there is still no general consensus about what the term means.

By the late 1980s, in the United States, one could not turn the television dial without hearing things like, "When he didn't show up for our date, my self-esteem was shattered!"--or "How could you let him treat you like that? Where's your self-esteem?" In a popular historical film drama about love and seduction among French aristocracy, we heard the anachronism of one character saying to another something like "I wanted you from the first moment I saw you. My self-esteem demanded it." When I saw that the term "self-esteem" appeared in the subtitle of a book by Elizabeth Taylor, I thought that the idea had truly "arrived."

If, once, the challenge was to gain public understanding of the importance of self-esteem, today the danger is that the idea might become trivialized.

By "self-esteem" I mean much more than that innate sense of self-worth that presumably is our human birthright--that spark that we who are psychotherapists or teachers seek to fan in those we work with. That spark is only the anteroom to self-esteem.

Self-esteem is the experience that we are appropriate to life and to the requirements of life. More specifically, self-esteem is (a) confidence in our ability to think, confidence in our ability to cope with the challenges of life; and (b) confidence in our right to be happy, the feeling of being worthy, deserving, entitled to assert our needs and wants and to enjoy the fruits of our efforts. Later I will refine and condense this definition. However, let me say here that self-esteem as I understand it is not a free gift that we need only claim: its possession over time represents an achievement.

But first, what do we mean when we assert that self-esteem is a powerful human need?

To say that self-esteem is a basic human need is to say that it makes an essential contribution to the life process; that it is indispensable to normal and healthy development; that it has survival-value. Lacking positive self-esteem, our psychological growth is stunted.

Positive self-esteem operates as, in effect, the immune system of consciousness, providing resistance, strength, and a capacity for regeneration.

When self-esteem is low, our resilience in the face of life's adversities is diminished. We crumble before vicissitudes that a healthier sense of self could vanquish. We tend to be more influenced by the desire to avoid pain than to experience joy; negatives have more power over us than positives.

If we do not believe in ourselves--neither in our efficacy nor in our goodness--the universe is a frightening place.

This does not mean that we are necessarily incapable of achieving any real values. Some of us may have the talent and drive to achieve a great deal, in spite of a poor self-concept--like the highly productive workaholic who is driven to prove his worth to, say, a father who predicted he would amount to nothing. But it does mean that we will be less effective--less creative--than we have the power to be; and it means that we will be crippled in our ability to find joy in our achievements. Nothing we do will ever feel like "enough."

If we do have realistic confidence in our mind and value, if we feel secure within ourselves, we tend to experience the world as open to us and to respond appropriately to challenges and opportunities. Self-esteem empowers, energizes, motivates. It inspires us to achieve and allows us to take pleasure and pride in our achievements. It allows us to experience satisfaction.

In their enthusiasm, some writers today seem to suggest that a healthy sense of self-value is all we need to assure happiness and success. The matter is more complex than that. We have more than one need, and there is no single solution to all the problems of our existence. A well-developed sense of self is a necessary condition of our well-being but not a sufficient condition. Its presence does not guarantee fulfillment; but its lack guarantees some measure of anxiety, frustration, despair.

Self-esteem proclaims itself as a need by virtue of the fact that its (relative) absence impairs our ability to function. This is why we say it has survival-value.

And never more so than today. We have reached a moment in history when self-esteem, which has always been a supremely important psychological need, has also become a supremely important economic need--the attribute imperative for adaptiveness to an increasingly complex, challenging, and competitive world.

The shift from a manufacturing society to an information society, the shift from physical labor to mind-work as the dominant employee activity, and the emergence of a global economy characterized by rapid

change, accelerating scientific and technological breakthroughs, and an unprecedented level of competitiveness, create demands for higher levels of education and training than were required of previous generations. Everyone knows this. But what is not equally understood is that these developments also create new demands on our psychological resources. Specifically, these developments ask for a greater capacity for innovation, self-management, personal responsibility, and self-direction. This is asked not just "at the top," but at every level of a business enterprise, from senior management to first-line supervisors and even to entry-level personnel. A modern business can no longer be run by a few people who think and a great many people who do what they are told (the traditional military, command-and-control model). Today, organizations need not only an unprecedentedly higher level of knowledge and skill among all those who participate, but also a higher level of personal autonomy, self-reliance, self-trust, and the capacity to exercise initiative--in a word, self-esteem. This means that persons possessing a decent level of self-esteem are now needed economically in large numbers. Historically, this is a new phenomenon.

In a world where there are more choices and options than ever before, and frontiers of limitless possibilities face us in whatever direction we look, we require a higher level of personal autonomy. This means a greater need to exercise independent judgment, to cultivate our own resources, and to take responsibility for the choices, values, and actions that shape our lives; a greater need for self-trust and self-reliance; a greater need for a reality-based belief in ourselves. *The greater the number of choices and decisions we need to make at a conscious level, the more urgent our need for self-esteem.*

What difference does self-esteem make?

To the extent that we are confident in the efficacy of our minds --confident of our ability to think, learn, understand--we tend to

persevere when faced with difficult or complex challenges. Persevering, we tend to succeed more often than we fail, thus confirming and reinforcing our sense of efficacy. To the extent that we doubt the efficacy of our minds and lack confidence in our thinking, we tend not to persevere but to give up. Giving up, we fail more often than we succeed, thus confirming and reinforcing our negative self-assessment.

High self-esteem seeks the stimulation of demanding goals; and reaching demanding goals nurtures good self-esteem. Low self-esteem seeks the safety of the familiar and undemanding; and confining oneself to the familiar and undemanding serves to weaken self-esteem.

The higher our self-esteem, the better equipped we are to cope with adversity in our careers or in our personal lives; the quicker we are to pick ourselves up after a fall; the more energy we have to begin anew.

The higher our self-esteem, the more ambitious we tend to be, not necessarily in a career or financial sense, but in terms of what we hope to experience in life--emotionally, creatively, spiritually. The lower our self-esteem, the less we aspire to, and the less we are likely to achieve. Either path tends to be self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating.

The higher our self-esteem, the more disposed we are to form nourishing rather than toxic relationships--since like is drawn to like, health is attracted to health, and vitality and expansiveness in others are naturally more appealing to persons of good self-esteem than are emptiness and dependency.

An important principle of human relationships is that we tend to feel most comfortable, most "at home," with persons whose self-esteem level resembles our own. High self-esteem individuals tend to be drawn to high self-esteem individuals. Medium self-esteem individuals are typically attracted to medium self-esteem individuals. Low self-esteem seeks low self-esteem in others. The most disastrous relationships are those between two persons both of whom think poorly

of themselves.

The higher our self-esteem, the more inclined we are to treat others with respect, benevolence, good will, and fairness--since we do not tend to perceive them as a threat, and since self-respect is the foundation of respect for others.

While an inadequate self-esteem can severely limit an individual's aspirations and accomplishments, the consequences of the problem need not be so obvious. Sometimes the consequences show up in more indirect ways. The time-bomb of a poor self-concept may tick silently for years while an individual, driven by a passion for success and exercising genuine ability, may rise higher and higher in his profession. Then, without real necessity, he starts cutting corners, morally and/or legally, in his eagerness to provide more lavish demonstrations of his mastery. Then he commits more flagrant offenses still, telling himself that he is "beyond good and evil," as if challenging the fates to bring him down. Only at the end, when his life and career explode in disgrace and ruin, can we see for how many years he has been moving relentlessly toward the final act of an unconscious lifescript he may have begun writing at the age of three.

Self-esteem has two interrelated aspects: a sense of personal efficacy (self-efficacy) and a sense of personal worth (self-respect). As a fully realized psychological experience, it is the integrated sum of these two aspects.

Self-efficacy means confidence in the functioning of my mind, in my ability to think, in the processes by which I judge, choose, decide; confidence in my ability to understand the facts of reality that fall within the sphere of my interests and needs; cognitive self-trust; cognitive self-reliance.

Self-respect means assurance of my value; an affirmative attitude toward my right to live and to be happy; comfort in appropriately asserting my thoughts, wants, and needs; the feeling that joy is my natural birthright.

Consider that if an individual felt inadequate to face the

challenges of life, if an individual lacked fundamental self-trust, confidence in his or her mind, we would recognize the presence of a self-esteem deficiency, no matter what other assets he or she possessed. Or if an individual lacked a basic sense of self-respect, felt unworthy or undeserving of the love or respect of others, unentitled to happiness, fearful of asserting thoughts, wants, or needs--again we would recognize a self-esteem deficiency, no matter what other positive attributes he or she exhibited. Self-efficacy and self-respect are the dual pillars of healthy self-esteem; absent either one, self-esteem is impaired. They are the defining characteristics of the term because of their fundamentality; they represent not derivative or secondary meanings of self-esteem but its essence.

The experience of *self-efficacy* generates the sense of control over one's life that we associate with psychological well-being, the sense of being at the vital center of one's existence--as contrasted with being a passive spectator and a victim of events.

The experience of *self-respect* makes possible a benevolent, non-neurotic sense of community with other individuals, the fellowship of independence and mutual regard--as contrasted with either alienated estrangement from the human race, on the one hand, or mindless submergence into the tribe, on the other.

Within a given person, there will be inevitable fluctuations in self-esteem levels, much as there are fluctuations in all psychological states. We need to think in terms of a person's *average level of self-esteem.* While we sometimes speak of self-esteem as a conviction about oneself, it is more accurate to speak of a *disposition* to experience oneself a particular way--as fundamentally efficacious and worthy. So: *Self-esteem is the disposition to experience oneself as competent to cope with the challenges of life and as deserving of happiness.*

To understand self-esteem, we must consider: Why does the need

for it arise? I have the impression that this question has been almost entirely neglected by investigators.

The question of the efficacy of their consciousness or the worthiness of their beings does not exist for lower animals. But human beings wonder: Can I trust my mind? Am I competent to think? Am I adequate? Am I enough? Am I a good person? Do I have integrity--that is, is there congruence between my ideals and my practice? Am I worthy of respect, love, success, happiness? It is not self-evident why such questions should even occur.

Our need of self-esteem is the result of two basic facts, both intrinsic to our species. The first is that we depend for our survival and our successful mastery of the environment on the appropriate use of our consciousness; our life and well-being depend on our ability to think. The second is that the right use of our consciousness is not automatic, is not "wired in" by nature; in the regulating of its activity, there is a crucial element of choice--therefore, of personal responsibility.

Like every other species capable of awareness, we depend for our survival and well-being on the guidance of our distinctive form of consciousness, the form uniquely human, our conceptual faculty--the faculty of abstraction, generalization, and integration.

This form of consciousness is what I understand by the term *mind*. Its essence is our ability to reason, which means to grasp relationships. Its hallmark is our power of propositional speech. To say that our life and well-being depend on our mind is to say that they depend on its appropriate exercise.

Mind is more than immediate explicit awareness. It is a complex architecture of structures and processes. It includes more than the verbal, linear, analytic processes popularly if misleadingly described sometimes as "left-brain" activity. It includes the totality of mental life, including the subconscious, the intuitive, the symbolic, all that which sometimes is associated with the "right brain." Mind is all that by means of which we reach out to and apprehend the world.

To learn to grow food, to construct a bridge, to harness

electricity, to grasp the healing possibilities of some substance, to allocate resources so as to maximize productivity, to see wealth-producing possibilities where they had not been seen before, to conduct a scientific experiment, to create--all require a process of thought.

To respond appropriately to the complaints of a child or a spouse, to recognize that there is a disparity between our behavior and our professed feelings, to discover how to deal with hurt and anger in ways that will heal rather than destroy--requires a process of thought.

Even to know when to abandon conscious efforts at problem-solving and turn the task over to the subconscious, to know when to allow conscious thinking to stop, or when to attend more closely to feelings or intuition (subconscious perceptions or integrations) --requires a process of thought, a process of rational connection.

The problem and the challenge is that, although thinking is a necessity of successful existence, we are not programmed to think automatically. We have a choice.

We are not responsible for controlling the activities of our heart, lungs, liver or kidneys; they are all part of the body's self-regulating system (although we are beginning to learn that some measure of control of these activities may be possible to us) . Nor are we obliged to supervise the homeostatic processes by which, for instance, a more or less constant temperature is maintained. Nature has designed the organs and systems of our bodies to function automatically in the service of our life without our volitional intervention. But our minds operate differently.

Our minds do not pump knowledge as our hearts pump blood, when and as needed. Our minds do not automatically guide us to act on our best, most rational and informed understanding, even when such understanding would clearly be beneficial. We do not begin to think "instinctively" merely because non-thinking, in a given situation, has become dangerous to us. Consciousness does not "reflexly" expand in

the face of the new and unfamiliar; sometimes we contract it instead. Nature has given us an extraordinary responsibility: the option of turning the searchlight of consciousness brighter or dimmer. This is the option of seeking awareness or not bothering to seek it or actively avoiding it. The option of thinking or not thinking. This is the root of our freedom and our responsibility.

We are the one species who can formulate a vision of what values are worth pursuing--and then pursue the opposite. We can decide that a given course of action is rational, moral, and wise--and then suspend consciousness and proceed to do something else. We are able to monitor our behavior and ask if it is consistent with our knowledge, convictions, and ideals--and we are also able to evade asking that question. The option of thinking or not thinking.

The choices we make concerning the operations of our consciousness have enormous ramifications for our life in general and our self-esteem in particular. Consider the impact on our life and on our sense of self entailed by the following options:

Focusing versus nonfocusing.
Thinking versus nonthinking.
Awareness versus unawareness.
Clarity versus obscurity or vagueness.
Respect for reality versus avoidance of reality.
Respect for facts versus indifference to facts.
Respect for truth versus rejection of truth.
Perseverance in the effort to understand versus abandonment of the effort.
Loyalty in action to our professed convictions versus disloyalty--the issue of integrity.
Honesty with self versus dishonesty.
Self-confrontation versus self-avoidance.
Receptivity to new knowledge versus closed-mindedness.
Willingness to see and correct errors versus

perseverance in error.

Concern with congruence versus disregard of contradictions.

Reason versus irrationalism; respect for logic, consistency, coherence, and evidence versus disregard or defiance of.

Loyalty to the responsibility of consciousness versus betrayal of that responsibility.

No one could seriously suggest that our sense of our competence to cope with the challenge of life or our sense of our goodness could remain unaffected, over time, by the pattern of our choices in regard to the above options.

The point is not that our self-esteem "should" be affected by the choices we make, but rather that by our natures it *must* be affected. If we develop habit patterns that cripple or incapacitate us for effective functioning, and that cause us to distrust ourselves, it would be irrational to suggest that we "should" go on feeling just as efficacious and worthy as we would feel it our choices had been better. This would imply that our actions have or should have nothing to do with how we feel about ourselves. It is one thing to caution against identifying oneself with a particular behavior; it is another to assert that there should be *no* connection between self-assessment and behavior. A disservice is done to people if they are offered "feel good" notions of self-esteem that divorce it from questions of consciousness, responsibility, or moral choice.

It is the fact that we have choices such as I have described, that we are confronted by options encountered nowhere else in nature, that we are the one species able to betray and act against our means of survival, that creates our need for self-esteem--which is the need to know that we are functioning as our life and well-being require.

The question is sometimes asked, "Is it possible to have too much self-esteem?"

No, it is not; no more than it is possible to have too much

physical health. Sometimes self-esteem is confused with boasting or bragging or arrogance; but such traits reflect, not too much self-esteem, but too little; they reflect a lack of self-esteem. Persons of high self-esteem are not driven to make themselves superior to others; they do not seek to prove their value by measuring themselves against a comparative standard. Their joy is in being who they are, not in being better than someone else.

On what does healthy self-esteem depend? What factors have an impact?

There is reason to suspect that we may come into this world with certain inherent differences that may make it easier or harder to attain healthy self-esteem--differences pertaining to energy, resilience, disposition to enjoy life, and the like. So possibly biology has an influence.

Certainly upbringing can play a powerful role. Research suggests that one of the best ways to have good self-esteem is to have parents who have good self-esteem and who model it, as is made clear in Stanley Coopersmith's "The Antecedents of Self-Esteem." In addition, if we have parents who raise us with love and respect, who allow us to experience consistent and benevolent acceptance, who gives us the supporting structure of reasonable rules and appropriate expectations, who do not assail us with contradictions, who do not resort to ridicule, humiliation, or physical abuse as means of controlling us, who project that they believe in our competence and goodness--we have a decent chance of internalizing their attitudes and thereby of acquiring the foundation for healthy self-esteem. But no research study has ever found this result to be inevitable. Coopersmith's study, for one, clearly shows that it is not. There are people who appear to have been raised superbly by the standards indicated above, and yet who are insecure, self-doubting adults. And there are people who have emerged from appalling backgrounds, raised by adults who did everything wrong, and yet they do well in school, form stable and satisfying relationships, have a powerful sense of their own value and

dignity, and as adults satisfy any rational criterion of good self-esteem.

While we may not know all the biological or developmental factors that influence self-esteem, we know a good deal about the specific (volitional) practices that raise or lower it. We know that an honest commitment to understanding inspires self-trust and that an avoidance of the effort has the opposite effect. We know that people who live mindfully feel more competent than those who live mindlessly. We know that integrity engenders self-respect and that hypocrisy does not. We "know" all this implicitly, although it is astonishing how rarely such matters are discussed.

We cannot work on self-esteem directly, neither our own nor anyone else's, because self-esteem is *a consequence*--a product of internally generated practices. If we understand what those practices are, we can commit to *initiating* them within ourselves and to dealing with others in such a way as to *facilitate* or *encourage* them to do likewise. To encourage self-esteem in the family, the school, or the workplace, for instance, is to create an environment that supports and reinforces the practices that strengthen self-esteem.

What, then, are these practices? More than three decades of study have convinced me that six are crucial and fundamental. When these practices are absent, self-esteem necessarily suffers; when and to the extent that they are an integral part of a person's life, self-esteem is strengthened. When we reflect on these practices, I believe the reasons for this become almost self-evident.

1. *The Practice of Living Consciously.*

If our lives and well-being depend on the appropriate use of our consciousness, then the extent to which we honor sight over blindness is the single most important determinant of our self-efficacy and self-respect. We cannot feel competent in life while wandering around (at work, dealing with bosses, subordinates, associates, customers, or in our marriages, or in our relations with our children) in a self-

induced mental fog. If we betray our basic means of survival by attempting to exist unthinkingly, or to evade discomfiting facts, our sense of worthiness suffers accordingly. We know our defaults, whether anyone else does. Self-esteem is the reputation we get with ourselves.

A thousand times a day we must choose the level of consciousness at which we will function. A thousand times a day we must choose between thinking and nonthinking. Gradually, over time, we establish a sense of the kind of person we are, depending on the choices we make, the degree of rationality and integrity we exhibit. That is the reputation of which I speak.

Living consciously entails:

A mind that is active rather than passive.

An intelligence that takes joy in its own function.

Being "in the moment," without losing the wider context.

Reaching out toward relevant facts rather than withdrawing from them.

Noticing and confronting one's impulses to avoid or deny painful or threatening realities.

Being concerned to know "where I am" relative to my various (personal and professional) goals and projects, and whether I am succeeding or failing.

Being concerned to know if my actions are in alignment with my purposes.

Searching for feedback from the environment so as to adjust or correct my course when necessary.

Persevering in the attempt to understand, in spite of difficulties.

Being receptive to new knowledge and willing to re-examine old assumptions.

Being willing to see and correct mistakes.

Seeking always to expand awareness--a commitment to learning--therefore, a commitment to growth as a

way of life.

A concern to understand the world around me.

A concern to know not only external reality but also internal, the reality of my needs, feelings, aspirations, and motives, so that I am not a stranger or a mystery to myself.

2. *The Practice of Self-Acceptance.*

At the deepest level, this is the virtue of commitment to the value of our own person--not the pretense at a self-esteem we do not possess, but rather the primary act of self-value that is the base of our dedication to achieving self-esteem.

It is expressed, in part, through our willingness to accept--that is, to make real to ourselves, without denial or evasion--that we think what we think, feel what we feel, have done what we have done, and are what we are. It is the refusal to regard any part of ourselves--our bodies, our fears, our thoughts, our actions, our dreams--as alien, as "not me."

Self-acceptance is our willingness to experience rather than to disown whatever may be the facts of our being at a particular moment. Self-acceptance is our refusal to be in an adversarial relationship to ourselves.

It is the willingness to say of any emotion or behavior, "This is an expression of me--not necessarily an expression I like or admire--but an expression of me nonetheless, at least at the time it occurred." It is the virtue of realism--that is, of respect for reality--applied to the self.

Thus, if I am confronted with a mistake I have made, in accepting that it is mine I am free to learn from it and to do better in the future. I cannot learn from a mistake I cannot accept having made. Self-acceptance is the precondition of change and growth.

3. *The Practice of Self-Responsibility.*

To feel competent to live and worthy of happiness, I need to experience a sense of control over my existence--which requires that I

be willing to take responsibility for my actions and the attainment of my goals--which means that I take responsibility for my life and well-being.

The practice of self-responsibility entails these realizations:

I am responsible for the achievement of my desires.

I am responsible for my choices and actions.

I am responsible for the level of consciousness I bring to my work.

I am responsible for the level of consciousness I bring to my relationships.

I am responsible for my behavior with other people --co-workers, associates, customers, spouse, children, friends.

I am responsible for how I prioritize my time.

I am responsible for the quality of my communications.

I am responsible for my personal happiness.

I responsible for choosing the values by which I live.

I am responsible for raising the level of my self-esteem.

To the extent that I evade responsibility for my life, I inflict wounds on my self-esteem. In accepting responsibility, I build self-esteem.

4. *The Practice of Self-Assertiveness.*

This is the virtue of appropriate self-expression--the willingness to put my thoughts, convictions, values, and feelings *into reality*. Its opposite is that surrender to timidity which consists of consigning myself to a perpetual underground where everything that I am lies hidden or still-born--to avoid confrontation with someone who's values differ from mine, or to please, placate, or manipulate someone, or in order simply to "belong."

Self-assertion does not mean belligerence or inappropriate aggressiveness. It simply means the willingness to stand up for myself, to be who I am openly, to treat myself with respect in all human encounters. It means the refusal to fake my person in order to

be liked.

To practice self-assertiveness is to live authentically, to speak and act from my innermost convictions and feelings--as a way of life, as a general rule (allowing for the obvious fact that there may be particular circumstances in which I may justifiably chose not to do so--for example, when confronted by a hold-up man).

To aspire is not yet self-assertion, or just barely; but to bring my aspirations into reality, is. To hold values is not yet self-assertion, or just barely; to pursue them and stand by them in the world, is. One of the great self-delusions is to think of oneself as "a valuer" while not pursuing one's values in reality when the freedom to do so exists.

Healthy self-assertion, as I use the concept here, entails the willingness to confront rather than evade the challenges of life, and to strive for mastery. When we expand the boundaries of our ability to cope, we expand self-efficacy and self-respect.

5. *The Practice of Living Purposefully.*

All living action is goal-directed. Life itself has been defined as a process of self-sustaining and self-generated action. Thus, purpose is of the very essence of the life process.

Through our purposes we organize our behavior, giving it focus and direction. Through our purposes we create the sense of structure that allows us to experience control over our existence.

To live without purpose is to live at the mercy of chance--the chance event, the chance phone call, the chance encounter--because we have no standard by which to judge what is or is not worth doing. Outside forces bounce us along, like a cork floating on water, with no initiative of our own to set a specific course. Our orientation to life is reactive rather than proactive.

To live purposefully is to use our powers for the attainment of goals we have selected: the goal of studying, of raising a family, of earning a living, of starting a new business, of bringing a new product into the marketplace, of solving a scientific problem, of

building a vacation home. It is our goals that led us forward. It is our goals that call on the exercise of our faculties. It is our goals that energize our existence.

To live purposefully is to live productively--which is a necessity of making ourselves competent to life. Productiveness is the act of supporting our existence by translating our thought into reality, of setting our goals and working for their achievement, of bringing knowledge, goods, or services into existence.

It is not the degree of a person's productive ability that matters here, but the person's choice to exercise such ability as he or she possesses. It is not the kind of work selected that is important (provided the work is not intrinsically anti-life), but whether a person seeks work that requires and expresses the full use of his or her intelligence, if the opportunity to do so exists.

We build our sense of fundamental efficacy through the mastery of particular forms of efficacy related to the attainment of particular tasks. Fundamental efficacy cannot be generated in a vacuum: it must be created and expressed through some specific tasks successfully mastered. It is not that achievements "prove" our worth, but rather that the process of achieving is the means by which we develop our effectiveness, our competence at living. I cannot be efficacious in the abstract without being efficacious about anything in particular. So, productive work has the potential of being a powerful self-esteem building activity.

To live purposefully and productively requires that we cultivate within ourselves a capacity for self-discipline. Self-discipline is the ability to organize our behavior over time in the service of specific tasks. No one can feel fully competent to cope with the challenges of life who is without the capacity for self-discipline.

To observe that purposefulness is essential to fully realized self-esteem should not be understood to mean that the measure of an individual's worth is his or her external achievements. We admire achievements--in others and in ourselves--and it is natural and appropriate for us to do so. But this is not the same thing as saying

that my achievements are the measure--or grounds--of my self-esteem. The root of my self-esteem is not my achievements but those internally generated practices that, among other things, *make it possible for me to achieve*--all the self-esteem virtues we are discussing here.

6. *The Practice of Integrity.*

As we mature and develop our own values and standards (or absorb them from others), the issue of personal integrity assumes increasing importance in our self-assessment. *Integrity* is the integration of ideals, convictions, standards, beliefs--and behavior. When our behavior is congruent with our professed values, when ideals and practice match, we have integrity.

When we behave in ways that conflict with our judgment of what is appropriate, we lose face in our own eyes. We respect ourselves less. If the policy becomes habitual, we trust ourselves less or cease to trust ourselves at all. When a breach of integrity wounds self-esteem, only the practice of integrity can heal it.

At the simplest level, personal integrity entails such questions as: Am I honest, reliable, and trustworthy? Do I keep my promises? Do I do the things I say I admire and do I avoid the things I say are despicable?

To understand why lapses of integrity are detrimental to self-esteem, consider what a lapse of integrity entails. If I act in contradiction to a moral value held by someone else but not by me, I may or may not be wrong, but I cannot be faulted for having betrayed my convictions. If, however, I act against what I myself regard as right, if my actions clash with my expressed values, then *I act against my own judgment, I betray my own mind.* Hypocrisy, by its very nature, is self-invalidating. It is mind rejecting itself. A default on integrity undermines me and contaminates my sense of self. It damages me as no external rebuke or rejection can damage me.

If I preach a concern with quality but indifferently sell my customers shoddy goods, if I unload bonds I know to be falling in value to a client who trusts my honor, if I pretend to care about my

staff's ideas when my mind is already made up, if I out-maneuver a colleague in the office and appropriate his achievements, if I ask for honest feedback and penalize the employee who disagrees with me, if I ask for pay sacrifices from others on the grounds of hard times and then give myself a gigantic bonus--I may evade my hypocrisy, I may insist "everyone does it," I may tell myself anything I like, but the fact remains I launch an assault on my self-respect that no rationalization will dispel. If I am uniquely situated to raise my self-esteem, I am also uniquely situated to lower it.

As a postscript to this brief discussion of integrity, I want to say a few words about benevolence and compassion.

Students of child development know that a child who is treated with respect tends to internalize that respect and then treat others with respect--in contrast to a child who is abused, internalizes self-contempt, and grows up reacting to others out of fear and rage. If I feel centered within myself, secure with my own boundaries, confident in my right to say yes when I want to say yes and no when I want to say no--benevolence is the natural result. There is no need to fear others, no need to protect myself with hostility. If I am secure in my right to exist, confident that I belong to myself, unthreatened by certainty in others, then co-operation with them to achieve shared goals tends to develop spontaneously.

Empathy and compassion, no less than benevolence and co-operativeness, are far more likely to be found among persons of high self-esteem than among low: my relationship to others tends to mirror and reflect my relationship to myself. Commenting on the admonition to love thy neighbor as thyself, longshoreman-philosopher Eric Hoffer remarks somewhere that the problem is that this precisely is what people do: persons who hate themselves hate others. The killers of the world, literally and figuratively, are not known to be in intimate or loving relationship to their inner selves.

About all of these virtues the question might be asked, "To practice them, does one not need already to possess self-esteem? How

then can they be the foundation of self-esteem?" In answering, I must introduce what I call *the principle of reciprocal causation.* By this I mean that behaviors that generate good self-esteem are also expressions of good self-esteem. Living consciously is both a cause and an effect of self-efficacy and self-respect. And so is self-acceptance, self-responsibility, all the other practices I describe. Thus, the more I live consciously, the more I trust my mind and respect my worth. The more I trust my mind and respect my worth, the more natural it feels to live consciously. The more I live with integrity, the more I enjoy good self-esteem; the more I enjoy good self-esteem, the more natural it feels to live with integrity.

Once we understand these practices, we have the power to choose them. The power to choose them is the power to raise the level of our self-esteem, from whatever point we may be starting and however difficult the project may be in the early stages.

The solution to a particular individual's damaged self-esteem can be far from simple. Factors can be involved that are outside the scope of this discussion. Blocks may need to be removed and skills acquired that are not easily accomplished on one's own. The contribution of a competent psychotherapist may well be essential. But the fact remains that, by whatever road a person arrives, it will still be the exercise or non-exercise of the practices I have described that will be decisive for self-esteem. Sooner or later, by one path or another, these remain the issues an individual will need to confront. To live consciously, to practice self-acceptance, to take responsibility for one's existence, to be self-assertive, to live purposefully, to practice integrity--are the roots of self-efficacy and self-respect. There are no substitutes.

Self-esteem is *a function of character.* This is the last point I wish to emphasize.

Sometimes we see people who enjoy worldly success, or are widely esteemed, and who have a public veneer of assurance, and yet are

deeply dissatisfied, anxious, or depressed. They may project the appearance of self-esteem, but do not possess the reality. How might we understand them?

Let us begin with the observation that to the extent that we fail to develop authentic self-esteem, the consequence is varying degrees of anxiety, insecurity, self-doubt--the sense of being, in effect, unfit for existence. This state is extremely painful. And because it is painful, we are motivated to evade it, to deny our fears, rationalize our behavior, and fake a self-esteem we do not possess. We may develop what I have termed *pseudo-self-esteem.*

Pseudo-self-esteem is the illusion of self-efficacy and self-respect without the reality. It is a nonrational, self-protective device to diminish anxiety and to provide a spurious sense of security--to assuage our need for authentic self-esteem while allowing the real causes of its lack to be evaded. It is based on values that may be appropriate or inappropriate but that in either case are not intrinsically related to that which genuine self-efficacy and self-respect require.

Thus, instead of seeking self-esteem through consciousness, responsibility, and integrity, we may seek it through popularity, prestige, material acquisitions, or sexual exploits. Instead of valuing personal authenticity, we may value belonging to the right clubs, or the right church, or the right political party. Instead of practicing appropriate self-assertion, we may practice blind loyalty to our particular group. Instead of seeking self-respect through honesty, we may seek it through philanthropy (I must be a good person, I do "good works"). Instead of striving for the power of competence, we may pursue the "power" of manipulating or controlling other people. The possibilities for self-deception are almost endless--all the blind alleys down which we can lose ourselves, not realizing that what we desire cannot be purchased with counterfeit currency.

Self-esteem is an intimate experience; it resides in the core of my being. It is what *I* think and feel about myself, not what someone else thinks or feels about me. This simple fact can hardly be over-

stressed.

I can be loved by my family, my mate, and my friends, and yet not love myself. I can be admired by my associates and yet regard myself as worthless. I can project an image of assurance and poise that fools virtually everyone and yet secretly tremble with a sense of my inadequacy.

I can fulfill the expectations of others and yet fail my own; I can win every honor and yet feel I have accomplished nothing; I can be adored by millions and yet wake up each morning with a sickening sense of fraudulence and emptiness.

To attain "success" without attaining positive self-esteem is to be condemned to feeling like an impostor anxiously awaiting exposure.

Just as the acclaim of others does not create our self-esteem, neither do knowledge, skills, material possessions, marriage, parenthood, philanthropic endeavors, sexual conquests, or face lifts. These things can sometimes make us feel better about ourselves temporarily, or more comfortable in particular situations--but comfort is not self-esteem.

Unfortunately, teachers of self-esteem are no less impervious to the worship of false gods than anyone else. I recall listening to a lecture by a man who conducts self-esteem seminars all over the world. He announced that one of the very best ways to raise our self-esteem is to surround ourselves with people who think highly of us. I thought of the nightmare of low self-esteem in persons surrounded by praise and adulation--like rock stars who have no idea how they got where they are and who cannot survive a day without drugs. I thought of the consequences for the victims of his teachings--the people who might seek self-esteem by trying to follow his advice, and would take the blame when they failed. The problem is that if persons with major unresolved self-esteem problems choose to become teachers in this field, their psychology shows up in their work. It is characteristic of low self-esteem individuals that they imagine the void within is to be filled by the approval and support of others.

Clearly it is wiser to seek companions who are the friends of one's self-esteem rather than its enemies; nurturing relationships are preferable to toxic ones. But to look to others as a primary source of our self-esteem is a manifestation of the same passivity and dependence that undermined one's sense of self in the first place.

I do not wish to suggest that a psychologically healthy person is unaffected by the feedback he or she receives from others. We are social beings and certainly others contribute to our self-perceptions. But there are gigantic differences among people in the relative importance to their self-esteem of the feedback they receive--persons for whom it is almost the *only* factor of importance and persons for whom the importance is comparatively minor. This is merely another way of saying there are gigantic differences among people in the degree of their autonomy.

Having worked for over thirty years with persons who are unhappily preoccupied with the opinions of others, I am persuaded that the most effective means of liberation is by raising the level of consciousness one brings to one's own experience; the more one turns up the volume on one's inner signals, the more external signals tend to recede into proper balance. This entails, as I wrote in "Honoring the Self," learning to listen to the body, learning to listen to the emotions, learning to think for oneself.

It might have struck you, reflecting on my list of self-esteem practices, that they sound very much like a code of ethics--or part of one. That is true. The virtues that self-esteem asks of us are also ones that life asks of us.

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